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ABSTRACT

Adult illiteracy is a complex, costly, and growing social problem. Three common areas of controversy related to the problem are: (1) definitions of adult literacy, (2) characteristics of illiterate adults, and (3) the purposes of literacy education. Illiteracy can be understood only in relation to a culture's definition of literacy. Due to differing definitions, statistics on the extent of illiteracy vary widely. The concept of "functional literacy" is controversial because it is determined by external standards and criteria. A tone of mission and concern for the less fortunate has dominated the perspective of illiterate adults. A picture is emerging now of illiterate adults as individuals who have educated themselves through life experiences and are frustrated with present literacy programs. Two common models of literacy programs are personal development and improvement and social change. Two primary systems for literacy programs currently serve the individual--the federally funded adult basic education program and national volunteer literacy efforts. Employers are emerging as a third delivery system providing literacy training for individual development. Community-controlled agencies that also offer literacy education are committed to improvement. (YLB)

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OVERVIEW

ERIC DIGEST NO.40

Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

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ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION

Adult illiteracy is a complex, costly social problem—one that is difficult to identify within the Nation's population (Mark 1983). This ERIC Digest examines some of the issues underlying adult literacy and describes current literacy education delivery systems.

How Serious Is the Adult Illiteracy Problem?

Despite efforts to curb it, illiteracy is a growing problem. Each year, an estimated 2.3 million persons join the pool of those 23 million adults considered to be functionally illiterate. This number includes high school dropouts and "push-outs," legal and illegal immigrants, and refugees (U.S. Department of Education n.d.).

The cost of illiteracy in the United States is high. One estimate places the yearly cost in welfare programs and unemployment compensation at $6 billion (Wellborn 1982).

What Issues Does Adult Illiteracy Entail?

Although there is increasing acknowledgement of adult illiteracy as a problem, a number of issues surround it. Consequently, differing perspectives affect efforts to eradicate the problem. Three common areas of controversy are definitions of adult literacy, the characteristics of illiterate adults, and the purposes of literacy education.

How Is Adult Literacy Defined?

Because literacy is historically and culturally relative, it is impossible to define in isolation from a specific time, place, and culture. Illiteracy can only be understood in relation to a culture's definition of literacy, since it is a lack of a certain set of characteristics.

Although definitions of literacy emphasize reading, writing, and computation skills, they disagree on the criteria for establishing skill level. Due to the use of differing definitions, statistics on the extent of illiteracy vary widely.

Definitions of literacy have changed over the past 50 years primarily due to the desire of policymakers to count illiterate adults. In the 1930s and 1940s, literacy was considered to be simply the ability to read and write a message. More recent definitions have focused on the effective or critical applications of these skills.

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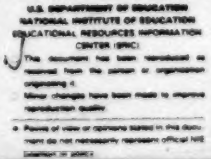
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The concept of "functional literacy" has emerged to describe the use of basic skills in specific contexts. The concept of functional literacy is controversial, however. Because functional literacy is determined by external standards and criteria, it removes the literacy judgment from the individual's cultural group and social setting. Critics feel such external criteria tend to reflect the bias of their developers rather than the values and norms of the individual's social and cultural group.

What Are the Characteristics of Illiterate Adults?

The literature has tended to portray illiterate adults from a deficit perspective, embedded in a culture of poverty. Although illiterate adults may have a fully developed language system, the literature more frequently mentions that they fear failure in teaching-learning situations, have low self-esteem and self-confidence, and resist change. They may be characterized as inarticulate and unable to cope or think abstractly. A tone of mission and concern for the less fortunate (e.g., rehabilitating the malfunctioning adult into normal society) tends to dominate the deficit perspective.

A new picture of illiterate adults is beginning to emerge, however. Qualitative studies in which the adults themselves were provided opportunities to share their own perspectives give a more balanced and accurate view. Although they may lack formal schooling, many have educated themselves through their life experiences. This emerging portrait also reveals that many illiterate adults are frustrated with educators and programs designed to develop their literacy skills.

What Are the Purposes of Literacy Education?

Because literacy programs are developed in response to differing perspectives, they have differing purposes. Two common models are (1) personal development and (2) empowerment and social change. The personal development model, which predominates in this country, emphasizes individual development. In this model, literacy is viewed as a skill that will enable the adult to change. The role of the educator in the personal development model is that of instructor and counselor.

The empowerment and social change model emphasizes making illiterate adults critically aware of social and political realities so that they can make changes in the existing system. In this model, the educator plays the role of facilitator and change agent. While not common in this country, the social change model has been used widely abroad.

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How Is Adult Literacy Education Provided?

The delivery systems for adult literacy programs in this country generally correspond to either the personal development or the social change model.

What Types of Programs Serve the Individual?

Currently, there are two primary systems for literacy programs serving the individual. The first is the federally funded adult basic education (ABE) program. Through the Adult Education Act of of 1966, each State receives funds to provide literacy programs at the local level. The ABE program is designed for adults 16 years or older with less than 12 years of school who are not currently enrolled in public schools. Despite consistent enrollment increases since the mid-1960s, this program is only able to serve a very small percentage of its target population.

National volunteer literacy efforts such as those sponsored through Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) and Laubach Literacy Action (LLA) also focus their attention on the individual. Most of these programs use volunteer tutors in a one-to-one situation. Many frequently work in conjunction with ABE programs to provide choices for potential clients.

Employers are emerging as a third delivery system providing literacy training for individual development. They are increasingly providing basic skills training for employees. According to a recent study, *Basic Skills in the U.S. Work Force*, 75 percent of the companies responding indicated they provided some type of remedial training (Henry and Raymond 1982).

What Are Community-oriented Programs?

Literacy education is usually only one aspect of services offered by community-oriented organizations, which are independent, community-controlled agencies that provide assistance in areas identified by community members. These organizations are committed to "empowerment," that is, increasing the ability of groups and individuals to control their own lives. Such organizations frequently work successfully with those persons who do not participate in more traditional programs serving individuals. The programs are characterized by a collaborative process in which mutually agreeable goals are worked out between the instructor and the students. Frequently, this process is more important than the end product.

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